NPR PURPOSES REVISITED: ECONOMIC PRESSURES AND THE MISSION OF NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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This paper examines the developments in National Public Radio to determine if the network is fulfilling its original mission in the present day. It is an opportune time to examine NPR's current mission because it is facing several new challenges. National Public Radio has had to adjust to the emergence of rival distribution networks such as American Public Media and Public Radio International. NPR is coming to terms with the fact that its audience is aging and is only slowly becoming more diverse. Public radio knows these things about itself because it has commissioned extensive audience research over the last two decades. This research in one major source of information for this paper, but I also made broad analyses of a few public radio programs as well as interviewed several industry professionals. By drawing on these sources, I conclude that National Public Radio is incapable of executing its full vision in today's radio market. NPR is unable to be a broadly based diverse service because it is forced to specialize in news programming in order to maintain a loyal audience that will continue to fund the network.

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Introduction

National Public Radio (NPR) has come a long way since its launch in April 1971. Its first programming provided coverage of Senate hearings on the conduct of the Vietnam War, the first time that full discussions from that body had been broadcast. The fledgling organization followed up that success with the debut of a news magazine program, *All Things Considered* (ATC), the following month.[1] Originally hosted by Robert Conley, the show soon found a long term anchor in Susan Stamberg. Stamberg, who still serves as a special correspondent for NPR, was known for her engaging personality and ability to carry on lengthy phone interviews with reporters and other eyewitnesses. This ability made Stamberg the embodiment or the voice of a new kind of public radio.

The decision to bring Stamberg to the network was made by NPR's first programming director William Siemering.[2] Siemering did much more for the network than give the network its first star; he was the brain behind the network. That hiring was as expression of a philosophy that he had set out the year before. In a document called "NPR Purposes," written in early 1970, Siemering set out his vision for what National Public Radio should attempt to be on a day-to-day basis:

> it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation. ... The total service should be trustworthy, enhance intellectual development, expand knowledge, deepen aural esthetic enjoyment, increase the pleasure of living in a pluralistic society and result in a service to listeners which makes them more responsive, informed human beings and intelligent responsible citizens of their communities and the world[3]

In this unapologetically idealistic credo, Siemering states emphatically that NPR should try to be much more than just another news outlet. By promising its listeners that

it will make them better citizens and better people, Siemering is saying that public radio will literally make the world a better place. The most important aspect of the mission statement is its focus on the audience.

Goal of the paper

This paper will examine the developments in National Public Radio to determine if the network is fulfilling Siemering's vision in the present day. It is an opportune time to examine NPR's current mission because it is facing several new challenges. National Public Radio has had to adjust to the emergence of rival distribution networks such as American Public Media and Public Radio International. NPR is coming to terms with the fact that its audience is aging and is only slowly becoming more diverse. Public radio knows these things about itself because it has commissioned extensive audience research over the last two decades. This research in one major source of information for this paper, but I also made broad analyses of a few public radio programs as well as interviewed several industry professionals. By drawing on these sources, I conclude that National Public Radio is incapable of executing Siemering's full vision in today's radio market. NPR is unable to be a broadly based diverse service because it is forced to specialize in news programming in order to maintain a loyal audience that will continue to fund the network.

Introduction, continued

Siemering sets out some long term goals and guidelines about the content he would like to see on the network but says nothing about the proper structure for this new organization other than that NPR should make an effort to cooperatively develop programs with local, regional and international stations.

The first priority is to encourage all of its listeners to appreciate the infinite possibilities that are provided by the members of the public. Through this celebration of the public as a whole, individuals can then expand their minds and actually make life more bearable not only for themselves but for other members of the public. The benefits would then spread, making a difference in the quality of life throughout the nation. "National Public Radio will not regard its audience as a "market" or in terms of its disposable income, but as curious, complex individuals who are looking for some understanding, meaning and joy in the human experience."[4] Siemering wanted NPR to contribute to, and spread, the understanding and joy that his ideal audience is searching for. Such a mission would transcend economic concerns because it would serve a higher purpose. According to Siemering, the strength of National Public Radio lies in the very people that serve as both sources and audience; not as a source of funding but as a source of inspiration and strength.

Unfortunately for Siemering, the realities of running a radio network sometimes reverse his priorities. The network quickly took steps away from the "organic radio" that he advocated. An overambitious leader ran the network into debt leading to tougher controls on federal dollars. Federal funding itself came under threat in the 1990's, providing public radio with an impetus to seek private sources of funding. National Public Radio has weathered these tough times well, but some think that success has come at a price. The overwhelming majority of public radio stations now depend on listener contributions for a significant portion of their revenues. In turn this necessity forces NPR to look at its audience not only as the public that it serves but also as a golden goose that must be handled with care.

It's difficult to keep a broadly targeted radio station afloat, and it may be even more challenging to do so in the future. Radio audiences in general are shrinking, and more troubling for NPR, there are signs that the loyalty felt by its listeners is declining as well. National Public Radio is at a crossroads where it must decide if it will recommit to Siemering's vision or whether the real world pressures of survival make those lofty goal impossible. NPR is in fact moving forward with this transition to a more specialized service, because the most important role of the public in today's public radio is as a funding source curious about the news of the day rather than as an audience interested in exploring diversity.

Of course, Siemering's vision of a better world could not even have been attempted without a solid foundation on which to build on. The cornerstone of that foundation was set out in a study conducted before NPR's formal inception. In 1968, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) commissioned a study to analyze noncommercial radio resources throughout the country. Headed by Samuel Holt, the aptly named *Public Radio Study* recommended that a national public radio division be created within the CPB, an idea that eventually became National Public Radio. One other recommendation remains especially relevant in public radio's current situation. Holt advocated that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which in the early days of National Public Radio accounted for the network's entire budget, "maintain relationships with services that would provide the network with research data on its audience."[5]

One of the purposes for the collection of these data was that "information about the public radio audience likely will prove of increasing importance to CPB as it tries to

evaluate the effectiveness of various efforts in educational radio."[6] Holt was one of the first believers in the value of audience research in public broadcasting. He developed the Public Radio Audience Profile as well as a system for audience measurement.[7] The focus on audience research was seen as antithetical to most people who worked in public radio in the 1970's and into the 80's, going so far as to call it "un-American."[8] Listening to "guys in suits with charts"[9] was another strike against the spontaneous, natural style that Siemering loved.

This tension between the two philosophies is become heightened now that the latest audience research into the supporters of public radio seems to indicate that a partial rejection of Siemering's vision may be necessary in order for NPR to remain competitive in today's marketplace. The most basic and consistent conclusion of NPR audience research is that its core audience is primarily composed of people who are well-educated, socially conscious and have enjoyed at least some level of success in a career. More briefly, the people most likely to listen to public radio are people very similar to those that create the programming.[10] This reality is in direct conflict with Siemering's hope that NPR would provide content that would be able to reach all people and provide each of them with something that would improve their lives. The current audience profile and the prevailing economic model that rewards a loyal audience rather than a large audience are moving NPR toward a degree of specialization into news programming that will divorce the network from the ideals set out in *NPR Purposes*.

History

The federal framework for a national public radio network was set out in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. This landmark legislation originally put much more emphasis on the development of a public television network than radio. In fact, all references to radio were removed from the bill just days before it came to a vote. Advocates for the medium were successful in gaining its reinstatement; the text of the legislation was changed by literally pasting the words "and radio" after each reference to public television.[11]

After the passage of the Act, public radio managers created NPR and assigned it control over the existing educational radio network in the United States. The network soon had a budget and a small staff of reporters, some of whom were hired by Siemering. Most of these first hires were either young journalists fresh out of a college station or experienced reporters frustrated by the increasing economic pressure on commercial media.[12] National Public Radio now had to produce some programming. The budding network scored a minor coup by gaining access to Senate deliberations, starting a tradition of extended political coverage that continues to this day. In just over a year, National Public Radio was ready to proceed with its first daily program. In fact, providing an identifiable daily product was Siemering's number one goal, as set out in *NPR Purposes*.

This program would stand for excellence and conform to "the highest standards of broadcast journalism". While intended for a general audience, the show "would not, however, substitute superficial blandness for genuine diversity of regions, values, and cultural and ethnic minorities which comprise American society." In short, the new

program would have to be the embodiment of everything that Siemering stood for, the crusade to make the world a better place for everyone, and all in a 90 minute magazine show. To execute this inclusive mission, Siemering wanted to use the resources of college and other educational stations around the country to bring as many people into the conversation about the day's news as possible. The show would not be just another newscast; it would concentrate on the why rather than the what.[13]

Of course, there were more practical reasons for not wanting to take on the established network in a contest to see who could gather the news most efficiently; the infant NPR couldn't compete with the resources of the established network. The first edition of the magazine show, newly minted as *All Things Considered*, on May 3rd 1971, started three minutes late and signed off the air before its scheduled end. ATC struggled through staff shakeups and infighting for almost a year before NPR President Don Quayle ordered Siemering to appoint someone to take day-to-day control of the show, something that the programming director, perhaps too focused on a larger strategic vision, was unable or unwilling to do. Siemering handed the reins over to Jack Mitchell. Mitchell, the first full time employee hired by NPR, was a radio veteran with experience at college stations in Wisconsin and Michigan and at the BBC.[14]

The first set of changes Mitchell made as producer of *All Things Considered* brought structure to the free-form program. Mitchell fixed the news headlines at the top of the show and organized the rest of the items in descending order of "hard newsiness."[15] These changes moved *ATC* closer to the shows produced by every other network. NPR was always supposed to be different, an alternative for the discerning listener. The chaos that was created by Siemering's commitment to "organic radio"

prevented the program from developing a concrete identity, defeating Siemering's own goal of creating an identifiable daily product.

Mitchell didn't go so far as to transform *All Things Considered* into a cookie-cutter news show. He instituted co-hosts for the program and selected Susan Stamberg to fill one of the slots. An unconventional choice at a time when not many women were given the opportunity to assume hosting duties, Stanberg was able to satisfy some of Siemering's ideals about diversity as well as helping out with the practicalities of producing a radio program. As a Jewish woman, Stamberg brought and still brings a very different voice to the airwaves. Her conversational style and ability to interview almost anyone, from reporters to dockworkers, allowed Mitchell to put all kinds of people on the show.[16] In this way, *ATC* was able to celebrate the diversity of the public by giving time to a large variety of voices and topics.

The success of *All Things Considered* continued through a changing of the guard at the top levels of NPR. In 1977, the presidency of the network was handed to Frank Mankiewicz, a man who brought with him a much different background than the first leaders of NPR. A lifelong political operative, he was Senator Robert F. Kennedy's press secretary, and directed the national presidential campaign for Senator George McGovern.[17] His administration would advance the process of providing more structure to NPR's programming, leading the network to one of the most prosperous periods in the organization's history only to precipitate its biggest crisis.

The lasting legacy of the Mankiewicz era is undoubtedly *Morning Edition.* That program is seen today as simply the morning counterpart to the afternoon flagship, *ATC*, but the morning show was born with a radically different philosophy. The primary

architect of *Morning Edition* was Mankiewicz's vice president for programming, Sam Holt. The author of 1969's *Public Radio Study* was an early devotee of audience research data, and he used it to craft *Morning Edition* into a powerhouse. Research indicated at what time the show would reach the largest number of people.

Additional research concluded that the new show would be well served to break up *All Things Considered's* trademark lengthy features into smaller segments. According to research guru David Giovanonni, even the public radio audience only has the patience to spend a few minutes on any one subject, excepting the most vital reports. These insights into the mind of the listener led to a format that contained shorter stories and frequent breaks for news headlines and blocks for local news. "Appointment listening" had no place in the morning; the public would tune in and out as their morning routine permitted, no matter how compelling the content at another time might be.[18] *Morning Edition* was the first successful marriage of public radio and techniques that were already common in the commercial broadcasting

Holt's creation gained steam quickly. Just four years after its inception, the overall public audience had quadrupled to over eight million listeners. NPR was poised to reap the benefits gained by giving its audience what it wanted. 1983 was an opportune time to experience exponential growth in the audience. That same year, the Reagan administration cut the budget for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting by 20 percent. The CPB was the sole source of funding for National Public Radio in those days, so such a substantial reduction naturally set off alarms in the NPR administration. Mankiewicz responded to the situation by devising a plan to divorce the network from

federal funding in three years.[19] The new sources of funding would come from the private sector in the form of underwriting on behalf of foundations and businesses.

At the same time, Mankiewicz also took steps to increase NPR's programming offerings. Mankiewicz sunk resources into developing NPR Plus, a 24-hour music distribution network that would be set up in direct competition to the newly formed American Public Radio, founded by Minnesota Public Radio icon Bill Kling.[20] Mankiewicz saw APR as a challenge to his supremacy in the public radio arena, one that the career politician could not abide. The antagonism between National Public Radio and the more powerful local stations was a repudiation of the cooperation between the two levels that made *Morning Edition* so popular in the first place. The program recognized that local content was just as important in holding an audience as the well-produced national content. Mankiewicz lost sight of the fact that public radio stations couldn't afford to be fighting amongst each other, especially at a time when federal funding was shrinking.

The combination of the funding cuts and the attempts to wean National Public Radio off of federal funding resulted in a multi-million dollar budget shortfall. Mankiewicz believed that with a concerted effort not unlike a political campaign, NPR could bring in grants and other institutional support at unheard of levels. These sources of funding had been experiencing a period of steady growth. Revenue from non-CPB sources grew ten-fold from 1977 to 1982. Mankiewicz's downfall stemmed from the fact that he expected this new revenue stream to grow too quickly. To meet its private fundraising goal for the single years of 1983, National Public Radio would have had to collect more than twice the amount of private funds it had acquired in the previous six

years. According to the government audit following the financial crisis, the biggest portion of the funding gap was caused by grants that failed to materialize as well as cost over-runs on NPR Plus.[21]

The consequences for the network following the shortfall were grave. NPR had to negotiate a bailout loan from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a loan with conditions that hampered the organization's independence. The CPB claimed a large amount of control over the network's finances, to the point of having final approval over NPR's budget. The loss of independence was especially bitter because the financial difficulties also necessitated that nearly 20 percent of the network's employees be laid off. Both the news and the cultural programming division at National Public Radio were hit just as hard and cultural programming had already been feeling squeezed as a result of the "newsy" *Morning Edition* appropriating prime morning airtime that used to belong to them.[22] One NPR employee who lost his job was Mankiewicz. The antipathy that he had earned from important local station managers and the stigma of running NPR into the ground forced the political professional to tender his resignation.

Once the waters had calmed a little bit at National Public Radio, the new president, Doug Bennet, was able to strike a deal with local stations that set up the beginnings of the modern business model for NPR. Under this new system, the national network would no longer receive direct payments from the Corporation from Public Broadcasting; instead that money would go directly to member stations. Some of those funds would then in turn be returned to the network in the form of fees collected for the right to air NPR produced programming.[23] For the first time, National Public Radio would be dependent on local stations and by extension, dependent on the people who

listened to those local stations. This dynamic is the most important one influencing the network today, and a fuller understanding of that relationship is required to determine if National Public Radio is still capable of carrying out Siemering's vision, conceived in the days of more abundant federal funding.

Who listens to Public Radio?

In the fall of 2005, an Arbitron survey concluded that National Public Radio enjoyed over 26 million listeners per week.[24] That number represented an all-time high for NPR. Still, that total is less than a tenth of the American population, surely a smaller proportion than Siemering and other founders would have like to have seen by this point in the organization's history. The one in ten ratio is also smaller than what might be necessary for NPR to execute its higher mission of spreading meaning and joy in the human experience. Furthermore, as public radio listeners are reminded during seemingly every on-air fundraising drive, only about one in ten audience members actually contribute to local stations. That statistic begs some questions: Who are these stalwarts who make up the foundation of NPR? Are its contributors representative of the general public that the network is supposed to serve, and do they "celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied?"

Public radio started to get those answers in 1988 after the publication of *Audience 88*, a landmark audience study authored by David Giovanonni, who served as NPR's director of research and evaluation from 1979 to 1986. The most important and best piece of news for public radio professionals was the conclusion that the entire range of public radio programming was extremely attractive to certain personality types. The majority of National Public Radio listeners fall into just a few personality types

outlined in the VALS (Values and Lifestyles) system.[25] The categories of the VALS system have changed since 1988, but at that time the type most likely to become a public radio listener was called Inner Directed, Socially Conscious. That particular subset makes up just 12 percent of the general population, but accounts for more than 40 percent of the public radio audience.

Besides being predisposed to be introverted, inner-directed individuals, these are people who conduct their lives in accord with inner values rather than in accord with the values of others. As the name would suggest, people classified as socially conscious have a profound sense of societal responsibility. Their concerns extend beyond themselves and others to society as a whole.[26] Combining the two sets of traits, the typical public radio listener would be someone who follows their own set of values whether or not they happen to be in accordance with the culture's general values. They would also attempt to enlarge the effect of those values because of a profound sense of social responsibility. With its insistence that NPR try and make the world a better place for all people by not only improving their minds but also speaking to people's souls, *NPR Purposes* is a textbook example of the thought processes of the typical public radio listener. Jack Mitchell had the same thought when he realized that the profile applied not just to Siemering, but to many people that were working at NPR.[27] Employees at the network were creating programming they believed to be informative and enjoyable, and as a result created a series of shows that was almost custom-made for the group of people that were most like them.

In light of the fact public radio programming was geared, if unconsciously, to a specific group of people, the next finding of the *Audience 88* study should not be

surprising. The majority of public radio programming is consumed by a small portion of public radio's audience. According to Giovanonni, about 40 percent of audience members accomplish more than 80 percent of the total consumption of NPR programming. The average time spent listening for the entire audience was seven and a half hours per week. Among those heavy listeners, however, the average time spent listening was more than double, 16 hours a week. Few people listen to a lot of public radio, but those who are heavily invested use the service to its utmost.[28]

Time spent listening was not the only metric that Giovanonni used to gauge attachment to public radio. The *Audience 88* study also grouped listeners into different clusters based on whether their favorite radio station was a public outlet. If a public station was a listener's number one choice, he was called a member of public radio's core. On the other hand, if the person preferred at least one commercial station to their favorite public alternative, he was placed on public radio's fringe. Unsurprisingly, core listeners were likely to be heavy consumers of public radio, although the "core" designation was independent of time spent listening.

Core listeners are the first to enter the world of public radio, and the last to leave. At any given time, 71 percent of the audience is a member of this core. These most ardent devotees are likely to have several traits in common with each other. Half are between the ages of 25 and 44 and have careers in professional and technical occupations. An astounding 78 percent have completed a college degree and/or attended graduate school. Even better news for the NPR administration that was beginning to see its audience as a direct source of funding, just under one-third of public radio's heavy core listeners live in households earn more than $50,000 per year. Despite constituting

only 28 percent of the total number of audience members, they account for 45 percent of total membership. By whatever statistical measure, these core members are the bedrock of public radio.[29]

At the other end of spectrum lies the class of listeners Giovanonni called the public radio "fringe." These people on the edge of NPR's consciousness spend only slightly more than two hours with public radio per week. Of the total time that the light fringe audience spends with radio, only slightly more than a tenth of that time is spent with a public station. Half of these individuals only listen to public radio one day a week, suggesting that they enjoy one or at most a few public radio programs. Although this group accounts for half of the individuals that tune in to public radio in any given week, only one in three are members of a public station and they only account for only 15 percent of the total time spent listening.[30]

The reasons for the different listening profiles in the two groups of audience members, lay, at least according to Giovanonni, in their physiological makeup. Only one-third were identified by the VALS system as socially conscious, down from 52 percent in the heavy core group. Fringe listeners also account for nearly half of the lapsed members in the public radio community. As also might be expected from people not strongly attached to the public radio service, fringe listeners are nearly two-thirds of the listeners that don't become contributors.[31] The fringe of the public radio audience is a vast, and to a large extent, an untapped resource. Because the psychological makeup of core and fringe listeners differs though, public radio programmers always face the challenge of whether to target the greatest number of listeners, the most loyal listeners, or somehow try and do both simultaneously.

A more concrete and perhaps troubling example of this tension is shown in the role of ethnic minority audiences in public radio. At the time of Giovanonni's first landmark study in 1988, only nine percent of the public radio audience identified themselves as non-white. It is hard to imagine how any media outlet with such a skewed racial demographic could do a creditable job of celebrating the human experience as infinitely varied. To be fair, the percentage of minority listener to NPR has increased since that first study. In a follow-up report released ten years later called *Audience 98*, Giovanonni estimated in non-white audience at one in seven, about 15 percent.[32]

According to the 2000 U.S. census, non-whites make up about 25 percent of the American population.[33] In *Audience 98*, Giovanonni says the biggest reason for the growth of the minority audience in public radio comes not from a shift in programming, but rather reflects the fact that more non-whites are receiving higher education. A college degree might be the strongest single factor in determining whether someone is susceptible to public radio, but NPR seemed to be unwilling to wait for the minority audience to continue its slow increase as education became more prevalent. The network took the bull by the horns and created a show specifically designed to attract an African-American audience.

NPR chose Tavis Smiley to host the new project. Smiley entered the media after a failed bid in Los Angeles politics. He spent most of the 1990's as a political commentator while being outspoken on issues of social justice. Smiley was one of the leaders behind a movement to award a Congressional Gold Medal to Rosa Parks. In 1996, he became the host of a public affair show on BET. Smiley was a rising star, and a good choice to be the face of this venture.[34]

The only problem was that it didn't work. The *Tavis Smiley Show* was discontinued in December of 2004, not even three years into its run. The reasons for the cancellation were simple: Smiley's star power among African-Americans was insufficient to offset the negative reaction that the show caused in NPR's established audience. Smiley blamed the failure on the unwillingness of the network to embrace the show and to promote it. Smiley may have a case, because his show did not enjoy much exposure. *The Tavis Smley Show* was heard on only eight percent of public radio stations.[35] The host also expressed the opinion that public radio needed to become more diverse "from top to bottom."[36] Smiley went on to host a television version of the *Tavis Smiley Show* on PBS, which is still on air.

There are lessons to be learned from the demise of the Smiley radio show, but some of them may be unpleasant for those that still believe a literal execution of Siemering's vision is possible. It seems clear that a large portion of the NPR audience is not ready to accept a "by us, for us" show with an emphasis on black issues. At the very least, station managers are afraid that their listeners don't want that type of programming, which brings the same result. As National Public Radio learned with the success of *Morning Edition*, the single greatest appeal of public radio is its ability to package well-produced national content with crucial local information. NPR's white audience will naturally prefer content geared toward their local communities than programming that is not, no matter how socially conscious this audience is. As Smiley discovered, some members of this majority audience were quick and vociferous in expressing their displeasure, criticizing his delivery and takes on issues[37].

Listeners control the purse strings of public radio. Direct contributions from the audience account for the majority of the operating budget of many local stations. Money from those stations in turn makes up about 40 percent of National Public Radio's budget.[38] NPR can't afford to anger a large portion of its audience because its entire economic model would collapse.

Acknowledging this fact, public radio is faced with a contradiction. It has a moral imperative spelled out in one of its founding documents to try to celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied and to increase the pleasure of living in a pluralistic society, two goals that would seem to require a diverse audience. In order to attract that audience, however, NPR will have to create programming that is less appealing to some of its core audience, the same people it depends on for its survival. The practicalities of keeping a radio station on the air are incompatible with some of the lofty goals set out in *NPR Purposes.*

David Giovanonni disagrees with the idea that National Public Radio is permanently wedded to a predominately white audience. He maintains that the gains that NPR has made among minority audiences will continue as the overall education level among non-whites continues to increase.[39] Although he was unhappy with the rate of progress in NPR's move toward greater diversity, Tavis Smiley believed that if more people of color were exposed to what public radio had to offer, they would continue to tune in.[40] Unfortunately, although the outreach efforts of NPR could always be improved, the issue here is more fundamental.

Public radio is about the issues of the day, and the approaches of whites and non-whites to those issues are different and will likely to remain so for sometime.

Because the majority of NPR's funding comes from white audiences, the majority of its programming will inevitably come from a white perspective. There is no instant fix to this dilemma, but there are steps that NPR can take. If the majority of the audience isn't receptive to programming like *The Tavis Smiley Show*, the network must take great care to place these shows in the few markets where it can succeed, and not force the programming into places where the situation is unfavorable. The network must also try to be patient and allow such shows time to gain momentum.

Once again, Holt's emphasis on audience research can prove useful in trying to execute Siemering's vision of trying to reach as many people as possible. The difference lies in the fact that *NPR Purposes* indicates that National Public Radio should be a uniform system with universal appeal. Economic realities dictate that public radio must micromanage its programming, even within a single market if it wants to reach a broader demographic. Micromanaging programming may include several stations in one market, each targeting a specific group. Public radio must cast a narrow net because the days of the mass audience are gone.

The "mass" media

Not too long ago, broadcasting in the United States was dominated by the big three networks. Each one of them could expect to capture a significant portion of the audience no matter what they put on the air for the simple reason that the public had almost no alternatives. Needless to say, that is no longer the way things work in media. America has added many seats at the network table and with it a legion of cable channels. As if that wasn't enough, media consumers now have the option of perusing ever-expanding digital platforms for exactly the news, entertainment and other forms of

recreation. Americans are closer than ever before to creating what Cass Sunstein calls "The Daily Me."[41]

National Public Radio has taken this trend and run with it. The NPR website prides itself on putting everything that the network and its member stations produce on offer. One popular feature of NPR's web presence is the ability to listen to today's programming over the Internet; npr.org listeners can access an extensive archive that extends back to 1984.

The capacity to look back on the past is useful, but as a news network, National Public Radio puts a heavy emphasis on getting its content out to its users by any means possible. The NPR user can listen to full shows online, or pick and choose only the segments that most interest them. If an audience member isn't near a radio, they can arrange to have the hour's headlines beamed to them on their cell phone or another wireless device. Npr.org also allows users to download podcasts on subjects ranging from blues music to the NFL. In many ways, people who only use National Public Radio only through the radio are missing out on a lot of what NPR has to offer.

Npr.org is an example of what MIT professor and media scholar Henry Jenkins calls a general move toward convergence in American media. Jenkins rejects the idea that pervasive technology will lead to a single "black box" from which the public will receive all of its media. Instead, Jenkins says that because the mass audience no longer exists, media companies are forced to distribute their content on a variety of platforms in order to reach as many people as possible. In other words, instead of all media coming into the home in just one way, the same media are arriving in many different forms.[42]

As our society becomes more dependent on technology and more technical expertise is necessary in order to access all of the day's news and entertainment, those citizens who are without the resources and skills to acquire and use that equipment will be at a disadvantage, creating a digital divide[43]. Fortunately for NPR, most of its listeners and users will find themselves on the right side of that digital divide. The digital divide is not as stark here in the United States as in other countries, but the best predictor for being able to use technology's full potential is formal education.[44] As I have mentioned several times, a college degree is also the best predictor of the typical public radio listener. National Public Radio has wholeheartedly accepted Jenkins' idea of convergence by transplanting as much trademark NPR content onto the web as possible. This allows the network to simultaneously expose non-radio users to the service while multiplying the platforms through which the core audience can access NPR programming, increasing their loyalty to the brand. In addition, listened can access programming that isn't on the schedule of their local station.

Public radio has another compelling reason to expand its presence on the Internet. National Public Radio realizes that it has to start appealing to a younger audience, because the baby boomers, the core age group of the public radio audience is beginning to retire. According to the most recent research by Giovanonni, people aged 35 and over are 85 percent of the overall audience. Back in 1988, more than half of public radio's heavy core listeners were between the ages of 25 and 44.[45] Now in 2008, this backbone of National Public Radio is entering middle age or at the other extreme, starting to collect Social Security.

There is reason to hope that NPR will be able to capture new audience members, but the network will have to battle uncertainty as well. In the report *Audience 2010*, published in 2006 as a sequel to similar reports in 1988 and 1998, colleges and universities still are a golden pipeline to public radio. A four-year degree transcends age and greatly increases the likelihood that a person will join the public radio audience.[46] Unfortunately for Giovanonni and his team, the motivations of people under the age of 35 remain something of a mystery.

It turns out that people under 35 are less likely than their elders to return audience research tools like an Arbitron survey. This fact forces radio programmers to make decisions based on smaller sample sizes, and thus less reliable information. By contrast, the reliability of the data provided by audience members over the age of 35 is rock solid, and may even be improving.[47] Coupled with the overwhelming majority of baby boomers in the public radio audience, the unreliability of data from the younger set leads to a clear choice for the adherents of audience research. The smart business move would be to program shows that would appeal to the largest portion of one's audience using research that has proven to be reliable in the past.

Just the facts, ma'am

National Public Radio has done exactly that, and the evidence can be seen in NPR's increased emphasis on its news programming. News and current affairs have always been a big part of the network. Its first program was a news magazine and the organization first made a name for itself through live coverage in the Congress. In the present day, informational programming is in fact squeezing out some of cultural programming that would otherwise have helped to satisfy Siemering's dictum that

National Public Radio preserve and transmit the cultural past as well as provide aural aesthetic experience which enriches.

This new golden era for NPR news coincides with the appointment of veteran newsman Kevin Klose to the network presidency. Klose paid his dues in journalism at the *Washington Post*, where he spent 25 years. During his tenure at the *Post*, Klose served as the city editor, Moscow bureau chief and deputy national editor[48]. In addition to his considerable experience as a journalist, Klose has taken steps to ensure the financial health of the network. The new president was instrumental in securing a 225 million dollar endowment from the late Jean Kroc, the wife of McDonald's founder Ray Kroc.[49] The Kroc gift, the largest in NPR history, made an almost immediate impact on the news division.

Under the terms of the gift agreement, 190 million dollars was placed into a permanent, restricted endowment to give National Public Radio a secure source of funding year after year. That left Klose and the NPR administration 35 million dollars to play with, and they committed a large portion of it to the news. Over the course of three years beginning in 2004, NPR invested 15 million dollars to expand nearly every type of news coverage on the network. The overall news staff was increased by 15 percent, including the hiring of Bill Marimow, former editor of *The Baltimore Sun*, to oversee national and investigative news. The cash infusion benefited public radio's foreign coverage as well. More than 10 bureaus were added during the expansion of NPR News; they including Dakar, Senegal, Cairo, Nairobi, Shanghai, Istanbul and Hanoi.[50] Informational programming has benefited substantially from Kroc's

generosity, and the fact that the news has received so much of the discretionary funds sends a clear signal about the current priorities of the network.

The research into the NPR audience says that Klose was entirely correct to invest so heavily in NPR news. *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* are the second and third most popular radio programs in the United States. Furthermore, according to *Audience 98*, Giovanonni's last major report before the expansion of the news division, approximately 90 percent of the time spent listening to national programming was spent listening to network news. Time spent listening translates directly into fundraising dollars, at least for the newsmagazines. According to Giovanonni, local music programming accounts for twice as much time spent listening as the national powerhouses *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*, but the marquee shows bring in approximately the same amount in contributions from listeners and much more money from underwriters.[51]

The disparity in the underwriting dollars comes from the different rates that stations charge to put an underwriting announcement on their air. On average, a station charges nearly three times as much per listener hour for a spot during one of NPR's flagship programs. Underwriters want to be where the engaged listeners are, and a quarter-hour of *All Things Considered* returns 60 percent more money to its station than the local jazz hour. Listeners pay more for NPR News because they value it more than the music programming provided by their local station. To quote Giovanonni, listeners are less likely to call music programming "an important part of my life" and to say that they would "miss it if it went away."[52]

These conclusions by the audience researchers serve as the basis for a powerful argument. If news and information programming is more valued than music by the customer and produces more money for member stations per quarter hour than a music show, public radio would be well served to have as much news on the air as possible. In the press release announcing the expansion of the NPR News Division, the network chose to emphasize the public service angle of its decision, citing a 2004 State of the Media report that concluded that the number of foreign correspondents and journalists in general is declining as media companies struggle to meet the increasingly stringent demands of the bottom line.[53] National Public Radio's renewed emphasis on news programming not only seemed like a smart business decision, but also one of the best ways to discharge its duty to help make its listeners better citizens and better people.

NPR and local stations across the country have taken that advice to heart. From 1995 to 2005, the proportion of time spent listening to news, information and entertainment programming jumped from 40 to 52 percent of the national total. At the same time, the proportion of locally produced music programming on the average station has dropped from 45 to 31 percent.[54] Some of the reasons for this shift are familiar. While it may be more expensive to acquire *All Things Considered* than to produce an hour of local music, the national show may be a much better financial play for the local station because that show brings in much more money from listeners and from underwriters. Because listeners value NPR News so highly, stations can build and keep an audience faster through *Morning Edition* than through even the highest quality local music show.

Local music is not only being squeezed out by national news, but by national music programming as well. Giovanonni says that listener loyalty for national services like Classical 24 and the Classical Public Radio network is nearly identical to that of local music programming.[55] If the listener doesn't make a distinction between national and local music shows, the station will go for the cheaper option. In an increasing number of cases, the relatively low dues of the national music shows are less expensive than the production costs of a local show. In the 10 year period between 1995 and 2005, the total number of hours spent listening to local classical music shows declined 25 percent.[56] National Public Radio has responded to the demand from local stations to provide even more programming like the golden gooses provided of *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*.

The first casualty of this policy was a two-hour weekly show called *Performance Today. PT* was conceived after the funding crisis in 1983 in the middle of an era when NPR was most concerned with building a loyal audience that would provide it with a sense of financial security. Small stations around the country had been asking for a national classical music service that could keep their morning news listeners tuned to the station through at least some of the workday. *Performance Today* was the first NPR program to be tested by a focus group prior to its debut. The participants in those groups "prefer more usual, standard, or classic classical music selections and will not react positively to using *Performance Today* as a venue for exploration of avant garde, new or unusual selections."[57]

The NPR administration didn't doubt the veracity of the research but the economics of funding the program prevented them from taking full advantage of its

advice. The president of National Public Radio during this period, Doug Bennet, secured funding for the show through the National Endowment for the Arts. As a precondition, the NEA required that *Performance Today* include not only performances of well-known classical pieces, but music outside of the western tradition, interviews with artists as well as features about a variety of arts, not just music. The NPR board expressed concern that all of the ancillary features would drag down the music service that smaller stations had requested, but allowed the show on the air once the program was entirely paid for through outside sources.[58]

While *Performance Today* was picked up by a few smaller stations, it never garnered the national appeal that both the Endowment and Bennet had hoped for. In this case, the dictates of potential funders forced NPR to adopt a program style that it suspected might prove unpopular. This case is the opposite of my thesis; that listeners as the primary source of funding for National Public Radio and its member stations force programmers to make decisions that are economically sound, but don't completely fulfill the goals set out in *NPR Purposes*. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same; the person with the purse strings makes the rules. *Performance Today* held on for a long time but eventually succumbed to the will of it listeners. NPR ceased distribution of the show in 2007.*

National Public Radio may have stopped beaming *Performance Today* to its member stations, but the program did not disappear from the air. The distribution rights for the program were picked up by American Public Media, the newest incarnation of Minnesota Public Radio, one of the strongest regional public radio networks in the

* Oregon Public Broadcasting dropped *Performance Today* from its schedule at the same time, causing me some personal pain. It remains one of my favorite shows in public radio.

country. The network currently boasts almost 15 million listeners per week; a respectable challenge to National Public Radio's 26 million.[59] Although APM has made a name for itself in news and information programming with its business show *Marketplace*, it has also been able to take advantage of some of the entertainment territory that NPR has forfeited over the last 10 years.

The centerpiece of the American Public Media lineup is the venerable variety show, *A Prairie Home Companion.* The star of the show is unquestionably the host, Garrison Keillor. The native Minnesotan guides the program through a series of seemingly unconnected features, from bluegrass standards to humorous dramas by the show's "Royal Academy of Radio Acting." Another staple of the program is Keillor's series of folksy essays about life growing up in a fictional town on the prairie. *A Prairie Home Companion* has developed a style all its own, and has stayed on the air for over 30 years, and starred in its own feature film.

Keillor's program did not start as an immediate success. Minnesota Public Radio president Bill Kling tinkered with the program for years to find the best way of getting the talented Keillor on the air.[60] *A Prairie Home Companion* violated some of the central tents of public radio audience research. Instead of having a uniform tone, the content of *APHC* can swing wildly from week to week. Rather than stick to the tried and true list of classical favorites to tide them over through the program, listeners can expect to hear anything from jazz by a Swedish ensemble to an aria by a famous soprano. Most importantly, Kling allowed *A Prairie Home Companion* time to grow an audience, patience that might not have been extended if Kring had been completely focused on creating a hit rather than just a good show.

Keillor's show is also apolitical even though its host is more outspoken off the air. *A Prairie Home Companion* also gives listeners an oasis from the stream of news and analysis that dominates the majority of the week's schedule. Public radio programming is generally more geared toward the arts on the weekend, but *APHC* is one of the few shows that leave the real world at the door. From the picture that I have painted about audience research and the restraints that it imposes on programming decisions, you might expect Giovanonni and his disciples to be dead set against a program that leaves out NPR's area of expertise, news and information shows as well as extremely regionally specific.

Entertainment shows, however outperform even the average NPR news show in one crucial dimension. The top two entertainment shows in public radio, APM's *A Prairie Home Companion* and NPR's *Car Talk* both have higher loyalty scores than even *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered.* The third rated show on that list, *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me* experienced a rapid increase in success from its debut in 1998 to the present, where it enjoys a loyalty rating roughly equal to the two newsmagazines.[61] On a show-by-show basis, top entertainment programs are the most valuable assets in the public radio portfolio.

These immensely popular programs experienced a period of growth in the last ten years, but they still make up a very small portion of public radio listening. In 2005, entertainment programs accounted for six percent of all time spent listening to public radio, up from four percent in 1995.[62] The overall increase is encouraging, but the two biggest shows, *A Prairie Home Companion* and *Car Talk* accounted for most of the gains.

With the exception of *Wait, Wait, Don't Me*, public radio isn't devoting many resources to finding the next big entertainment hit. National Pubic Radio's most recent programming initiatives are variations on the theme set out by the classic newsmagazines. *Day to Day* is the first major effort out of NPR West, the production center launched in Los Angeles in 2002. The show extends the coverage that NPR provided with *Morning Edition*, giving listeners analysis on developments that have occurred through the middle of the work day. *Day to Day* departs from the classic formula by featuring frequent contributions from the online magazine *Slate* and by demonstrating a willingness to spend time on more "fluffy" news toward the end of the program.

This show was followed closely by *The Bryant Park Project*, launched in late 2007. Named for the famous area of green space in the middle of Manhattan, this program is trying to position itself as the *Morning Edition* of the next generation. *The Bryant Park Project* is designed to run during morning drive time, prime real estate for radio. The program takes up the challenge of appealing to a younger audience discussed earlier in the paper. *BPP* puts an emphasis on using all of the technological platforms available through the NPR website, including a daily podcast and blog.

This younger, hipper show also brings a different mix of content to weekday mornings. *Bryant Park* features a regular Tuesday segment focused on music performances and reviews, which NPR had traditionally reserved for the weekend, when the network loosens its collar. *The Bryant Park Project* is a show for a network at a crossroads. On the one hand, the show represents an evolution from the proven formula used in the standard newsmagazines. It sacrifices some important airtime to

introduce more content about music and the arts. Add to that the wholehearted embrace of the digital age and the show certainly has a different feel than *Morning Edition.*

On the other hand, as the show's webpage points out that *The Bryant Park Project* is at its core a news show that hopes to still use the "authority and intelligence of NPR"[63] albeit as part of a different formula. A few extra segments on the latest CD reviews don't change the fundamental character of the morning newsmagazine. *Bryant Park* goes further than *Morning Edition* and *Day to Day* in attempting to create a different flavor but in the final analysis, NPR remains where it is most comfortable on weekday mornings, delivering the news.

Audience research may have shown that entertainment shows have more potential than NPR's strongest news shows, but it doesn't provide executives a formula for crafting the next hit show. The producer with the most success in NPR entertainment over the last ten years is unquestionably Doug Berman. As executive producer of *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me* and *Car Talk*, Berman is the mastermind behind the two most popular entertainment shows in the NPR lineup. Berman has a freewheeling, irreverent style that is apparent in the shows he produces. *Car Talk* features automotive advice dispensed by the Magliozzi brothers, mechanics with Boston accents as thick as a bowl of New England clam chowder.

Apart from their distinctive voices, Berman's first hit show has other ways of throwing the NPR playbook out the window. Political correctness doesn't have a place in the *Car Talk* studios; the show has an official list of people its offended.[64] Berman and the Magliozzis seem to delight living outside the normal NPR comfort zone. Before

breaks in the program, the brothers take it upon themselves to reassure listeners that they are in fact listening to National Public Radio. A typical example would be "Even though Carl Kassel (veteran NPR anchor) threatens to retire every time he hears us say it, this is NPR."

National Public Radio distributes *Car Talk*, but it has no direct control over day-to-day operations. In 1992, Berman and the Magliozzis formed the firm of Dewey, Cheetham and Howe to provide a buffer between the show and the various levels of public radio and to keep their operation independent.[65] The fact that Berman felt it necessary to remain completely independent of the national network is telling. The minds behind *Car Talk* are afraid that the guys in suits with charts would invade the office and tone down or strip away the unique qualities of the show in order to make it "safer" for the mainstream public radio audience.

This caution grows from one of the biggest truths in public radio. All stations are trying to build their audience, but they must walk a tightrope to ensure that new ideas and sounds don't scare away the traditional listeners that make up the core of the audience.[66] This necessity makes creating the next big entertainment show incredibly difficult for NPR. Shows like *Prairie Home Companion* and *Car Talk* took years to perfect in their own local markets before they were picked up for national distribution.

Because of the remarkable growth of NPR news programming and the recent investment in expanding that division, it is unlikely that decision-makers at National Public Radio would chance resources on a major entertainment venture when they can be surer of the success of a news show that follows the formula developed over the last three decades. It is cheaper and less risky for NPR to contract with local stations and

production companies to provide it with supplements to the bread and butter of newsmagazines than to produce them in house. The economic model of radio makes it impossible for NPR to fulfill Siemering's vision of a singular service that provided a slate of programs that appeal to and celebrates the infinite diversity of the human race.

Conclusion/Discussion

What is true of National Public Radio is not necessarily true of the entire public radio system as a whole. Local station managers have more programming options than ever before. Programmers can draw on shows from NPR, APM, PRI, and the BBC as well as directly from local stations across the country. Thanks to this wealth of options, individual stations are able to craft a format that their local audience will support. But because of the economic pressures laid out in this paper, few stations will have the luxury of creating a lineup that features a diverse set of voices, issues and shows.

The vast majority of public radio revenue is dependent, directly or indirectly on listener contributions. Apart from direct donations, underwriters want to place their announcements where they will be heard by the greatest number of loyal listeners. Philanthropists like Joan Kroc also have to be convinced that public radio shares their values enough to be worthy recipients of their charity. The core of the public radio audience, its primary source of funding; are typically white, well-educated, socially conscious and affluent. As a consequence, the average public radio show will cater to the interests of those most important listeners. NPR does this by creating shows that deliver content relevant to the values of this core audience, namely newsmagazines like *All Things Considered*.

There is however, enough diversity in the interests of the public radio audience to justify programming other than 24 hours of *All Things Considered*. NPR cannot fulfill Siemering's vision of a broadly based service alone, but multiple stations in a single market allow people to create a much more diverse experience for all. For example in the Portland, Oregon market, KOPB employs a news heavy format, which allows sharing the market with a 24 hour-classical station. In fact the presence of an all-classical station caused OPB to remove *Performance Today* from its schedule. OPB also utilizes the Internet to provide listeners with a 24-hour stream of more contemporary music.[67] Public radio is adapting to the new media environment where consumers utilize the many sources available to them to create a composite that is most appealing to them. As in Portland, markets are now accommodating more than one public radio station with more than one format. If this trend continues, listeners will be able to pick and choose from different stations to create a more diverse experience than would be possible from just one source. The sum of the public radio stations is greater than the whole of its parts of which NPR is the biggest piece.

National Public Radio has changed dramatically since its inception in 1970. It has grown from a small collection of recent college graduates and frustrated mainstream journalists to the very definition of mainstream radio news. In that process, Bill Siemering, the author of the network's mission statement, *NPR Purposes,* says he feels that the network has lost some of the adventurous spirit and spontaneity that characterized the early days of NPR. Siemering's network was a victim of its own success. It gained a following by creating quality programming that appealed to the

people that made it. NPR then used the 1980's audience research spearheaded by David Giovanonni to help grow and expand that audience.

Following the funding crisis of 1983, National Public Radio began a transition away from substantial funding by the federal government. Listeners and underwriters stepped in to become public radio's primary sources of funding. Stations managers call this revenue "listener-sensitive" for good reason. The core of the NPR audience has shown that it can and will react negatively to shows that don't cater adequately to its issues and interests, as in the case of *The Tavis Smiley Show*. Because that core audience comes primarily from a white, well-educated, affluent background. The necessity to create programming that appeals to this narrow demographic violates Siemering's vision of a single service that offered something that would improve the human race in all of its infinite diversity. This need will grow even stronger in the next few years as consumers are given even more options to customize and personalize whatever media they consume.

In the last decade, National Public Radio has chosen to emphasize news and informational programming. Its first initiative after securing the major endowment from the Kroc family was to significantly expand the staff of NPR News, placing special importance on foreign coverage.

At the same time, less cultural and entertainment programming is coming out of NPR headquarters. The most popular weekend program on public radio, *A Prairie Home Companion* is distributed by American Public Media, a rival distributor. The number one show distributed by NPR, *Car Talk*, is controlled by an independent

production company, formed in part to keep the zany show safe from the restraining impulses of the suits at the network.

In today's media environment, National Public Radio is forced to play it safe. The economic model for radio in the United States rewards stations that can maintain a loyal audience, even if the station must forfeit the opportunity to appeal to a broader group of the public. NPR does a fantastic job at what it does well, intelligent news gathering and analysis. The public radio audience is also well-served by organizations like American Public Media and Public Radio International that pick up the arts and entertainment programming that NPR literally cannot afford to produce. On the whole, public radio is healthy and goes a long way to satisfying Siemering's utopian goals. Siemering though, wasn't writing a mission statement for the medium as a whole. In 1970, Siemering advocated for a single national service that would attempt to serve all of the public's wants equally. National Public Radio isn't able to complete its mission alone; the economic pressures first pointed out by Sam Holt prevent it. NPR is the gold standard in radio, but it can't live up to Siemering's standard.

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